

1998 Session Overview

Some are trying to characterize the 1998 legislative session in terms of what it did not do. And its worth mentioning what the state Legislature did not do in 1998.

- ✓We did not forget our commitment to education and public safety
- ✓We did not raise taxes on working families, and
- ✓We did not jeopardize the future with reckless spending

The critics are having trouble adjusting to the new way of doing business in Olympia. They are more accustomed to legislative one-upmanship, an approach that brings lawmakers to Olympia each year intent on outdoing the previous year's effort.

Legislatures of the past were judged exclusively on the number of programs they created and the amount of money they spent to pay for them. Critics of Olympia's new way of doing business are more comfortable with this approach. They are quick to accuse the Legislature of missing "opportunities" and failure to make "investments" in the future. By their definition, of course, "opportunities" involve higher spending. And "investments" are always made with the money working families struggle to earn.

1998 continued the Legislature's recent efforts to control spending, cut taxes and keep its commitments to schools and public safety. Washington sets policy in two-year increments, so legislators meet every other year to review those policies, address emergencies and make mid-course corrections. A look at the record shows that Washington is on course to embrace the future.

Education

In 1997, the Legislature made a major commitment to public schools. We:

- ✓Added new enrollments at state colleges and universities
- ✓Expanded financial aid for college students
- ✓Fully funded voter-approved school construction projects
- ✓Increased salaries to attract and retain good teachers and faculty, and
- ✓Made a major contribution to put new technology and instructional materials into classrooms

That placed education at the top of the Legislature's priority list. But last fall, results of a fourth-grade reading test gave new urgency to the state's focus on schools. Children learn to read when they are young and read to learn the rest of their lives. So the Legislature enacted legislation that makes \$17 million available to local schools. The money can be used for:

- ✓Additional teacher training
- ✓Tutors to help students keep up with the most basic learning skill, and
- ✓Classroom materials to promote reading

Public Safety

The 1998 legislative session found some of its greatest inspiration in the names of victims whose personal tragedies threatened our sense of safety and security.

- ✓**Mary Johnsen**, a 38-year-old Issaquah mother of two killed while taking an evening stroll with her husband of 16 years. Mary was struck by a drunken driver with four

previous convictions. Her tragic and untimely death renewed enthusiasm for laws to protect Washington families from the plague of drunken driving.

✓**Stanley Stevenson**, the retired firefighter senselessly stabbed to death last summer after leaving a Seattle Mariners game at the Kingdome. Mr. Stevenson's family helped convince lawmakers that judges need greater power to confine potentially violent mentally ill offenders.

✓**Ashley Jones**, the 12-year-old Stanwood babysitter who was brutally raped and murdered by an inmate at an unsecured juvenile group home. Her story inspired heightened security at state juvenile facilities and intensified monitoring of juveniles in confinement.

Each of these names gave rise to changes in state law that will make Washington safer and its families more secure. Although their stories sadden us, their personal tragedies led to action that will save hundreds of lives.

State Spending: Promises Made, Promises Kept

The new way of doing business in Olympia is nowhere more evident than in the state's two-year budget, where promises are made and promises are kept. The \$19.085 billion spending plan passed last year is a responsible, sustainable framework for Washington's future.

Lawmakers arrived in Olympia this year with a commitment to hold the line on spending so people could keep more of what they earn. That raised the bar for anyone who arrived in the state capital with designs on the state's \$800-million tax surplus.

In the end, the supplemental spending plan funded critical needs by taking the same responsible approach established in the original budget. Overall spending was held to \$19.085 billion, \$68 million below the statutory spending limit, and the state was left with \$782 million in reserve. In other budget highlights:

- ✓Taxes were cut to create jobs and stimulate economic activity (\$28 million)
- ✓Funding was provided for the Successful Readers Program (\$17 million)
- ✓Money was made available to fund salmon recovery (\$26 million)
- ✓Loans were made to accelerate critical transportation projects (\$25 million)
- ✓Public safety improvements received emergency funding (\$25 million)

Transportation Financing

The session's greatest challenge became its greatest achievement. Despite a growing list of critical transportation projects, the public overwhelmingly opposed a gas-tax increase. The Legislature responded with a funding innovation that actually cuts taxes and uses part of the state revenue surplus to pay for roads.

Most people think the annual license tax on their car pays for roads, and it should. But the state tax on motor vehicles is used for a variety of purposes unrelated to transportation. This year, legislators put together a five-year transportation funding package that:

- ✓Avoids a gas-tax increase
- ✓Cuts the annual car tax by \$30 per car for a total tax cut of \$257 million over the next two years
- ✓Transfers part of the car tax to provide up to \$2.4 billion for road projects, and
- ✓Prepares for the state's long-range needs

The plan will be on the ballot in November.

Conclusion

Some will criticize the new way of doing business in Olympia. But most people recognize that the old approach simply does not work. No one wants to go back to the old boom-and-bust cycle, spending every penny in good times only to raise taxes and make painful program cuts when hard times hit.

Over the last two years the Legislature established a solid framework for Washington's future. Promises were made to reduce taxes and spending so families could keep more of what they earn. Those promises were kept. Schools were placed at the top of the state's priority list, but they weren't used as an excuse to raise taxes. Educational improvement efforts were targeted to focus more attention on basics and direct more resources to the classroom. And the safety and security concerns of families were addressed with new crime legislation designed to protect innocent victims and punish criminals.

The new way of doing business in the state capital has Washington on the right course to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.